

Reentry Council makes recommendations on jobs, housing, mental health

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The Mississippi Reentry Council today made recommendations regarding employment, housing, mental health care and other issues affecting former inmates after their release from prison.

The Reentry Council presented its report to the Governor, the Legislature and the Supreme Court. The report examines, among other things, post-release housing, mental health care and job finding for inmates leaving prison, and calls for complete implementation of criminal justice reform law enacted two years ago.

Among the recommendations is a proposal to use the Marion/Walthall Regional Jail for a pilot program for transitional housing, a halfway house, a technical violation center and a cognitive behavior modification program for inmates leaving prison.

The report said, “A significant impediment for inmates leaving institutions is a suitable place to live. In fact, a significant number of parole eligible inmates remain in custody because they have no place to go. This results in significant incarceration costs and is of no benefit to the inmate.”

The Reentry Council report called for continued development of programming in prisons to prepare inmates for jobs.

The Reentry Council asked the Legislature to investigate possible creation of a system of mental health and reentry courts modeled on the state’s drug courts. About 17 percent of inmates leaving state prisons have diagnosed mental health issues. Many are on medications, and they are provided a 30-day supply upon release from prison. The report also called for implementing a memorandum of understanding with the Social Security Administration to provide immediate access to SSI and Medicaid benefits for mentally ill inmates upon release from prison.

“Mentally ill inmates are at high risk to recidivate without continued mental health treatment, including medications,” the report said.

The Reentry Council works to create effective strategies to assist former inmates in their return to society, reduce recidivism, provide ample funds for operating the state prison system and improve public safety. The Reentry Council began as an ad hoc group in December 2013 and was formalized by the Legislature in 2015.

U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett of Hattiesburg, chairman of the Reentry Council, said Thursday, “Almost 10,000 Mississippians leave prison each year and return to our communities. Everyone benefits when they return, join the mainstream of society and become productive, law abiding citizens. Transitioning from years of incarceration back to freedom is difficult. We will make our communities safer, save taxpayers money and improve the lot of reentering inmates and their families when the transition is successful. The Reentry Council is working to develop programs, partnerships and accountability to make these goals achievable.”

The Reentry Council report noted that from 2013 to 2015, the state’s inmate population declined by more than 4,000. The report credited sweeping changes in sentencing laws brought about by House Bill 585, which was passed by the 2014 Legislature.

But the report said that labor-intensive and expensive requirements of HB 585, including risk-needs assessments of inmates, have not been completely implemented. The report called for appropriate funding to allow all mandates of the reform legislation to be put into practice quickly.

Other recommendations include:

- determine future prison space needs and develop objective criteria to evaluate incarceration trends and the most efficient use of resources;

- conduct a study of the disabled, sick elderly population in prison to develop a cost-saving plan to release those inmates to specially designed nursing homes, families or other suitable places in the communities;
- conduct a study to determine the advisability, cost and benefits of abating inmates' child support obligations while incarcerated;
- develop an enforcement mechanism for the HB 585 requirement that inmates leaving prison have a government issued identification card.

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